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M.V.A. FINAL VISUAL PRESENTATION

by

KEITH HARDER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS


IN

PAINTING

DEPARTMENT OF ART AND DESIGN

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 1989



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I hereby release the following works for incorporation into the University Collections, University of Alberta, as part of the Master of Visual Arts Thesis Collection:

<u>TITLE</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>MEDIUM</u>	<u>SIZE</u>
Studio Shelf	1988	Oil on Canvas	

KEITH B. HARDER

M.V.A. PAINTING THESIS, 1989

Artistic Position

Painting, in our civilization, is one of the ways we have of thinking about the things that matter to us. It is my way of pursuing the obsession with finding some meaning in my experience of life. For me, this means making some sense out of the connection that I detect between things. In one way, I want to impose a structure on a confusing universe.

Human frailty has forced me to narrow down this structuring to a small bit of the universe. I have chosen to explore the activity of seeing as we experience it at this point in history. That choice is what has steered me into the descriptive approach to painting.

Descriptive art can have many applications, but, in my case, it is particularly suited to the purpose of bringing the act of seeing to a level of conscious consideration. I want to do this in order to understand what seeing means because it frequently stirs a variety of emotions within me. As a fairly representative creature of my society, I presume to think that my responses are not uncharacteristic. I take the view, then, that in the act of seeing there is some particular value for us in this culture, and that value is part of our identity. The nature of this connection is the object of my thinking which in turn structures my paintings.

I do not look for this value in the functional kind of seeing that is used for reading or driving a car. Nor do I investigate the associations and references that can be distilled from the things we choose to look at. Instead, I find that value is linked to the appearance of something when it is perceived in its uniqueness as a thing with its own existence; that is, when it is encountered in its otherness. In looking at things this way, we situate ourselves in time and space physically, but we also situate our identity relative to the other thing. We are in relationship to what we see. Looking establishes mutual existence and builds a bridge between the world-out-there and the world within. The significance of this gets attached to the perception of appearances. This perception though, cannot be taken as a matter of fact.

For most of history, perception was considered a straight forward operation. This led to the suspicion that descriptive painting was a mindless activity of no real artistic merit. Modern psychology, however, has shown how subjective perception is. Perception is an operation of the mind, not the eye, and as such, is surprisingly selective. Our vision is ordered by knowledge and experience, and so what we see is affected by personal and cultural history. How we represent our thinking and seeing contributes significantly to subsequent thoughts and perceptions. In this way, art itself has formed our habits of seeing.

The visual sense has been educated by a tradition of visual culture which has given the business of seeing more significance

than just as a means of getting information. Painting has played a dominant role in creating a visual vocabulary and canons of form that have become terms of reference for articulating cultural values. In doing so it has built connections between the past and present that have given form to the way we think about ourselves. In this way, the search for meaning has become meaningful itself.

In my approach to painting I have found a strong connection to the painting tradition. The devices I use, that are well suited to dealing with my contemporary concerns, are a cultural inheritance. I am particularly indebted to the development of descriptive painting in Holland from the time of Van Eyck to Vermeer. My technique is similiar, as is my conceptual framework. In this tradition the structuring principles were that of neutral observation, a mannerless style, and a meticulous attention to craft. The Dutch had a trust in the appearances of the physical world and were motivated by a cultural love of knowledge. They passed on a visual language of surface, space, and light, as well as a quality of transcendence that still affects our thinking.

In my own way, I have taken these devices into the twentieth century to address contemporary questions. I am motivated by a wonder and a horror in what I see. I investigate the appearances of things to understand my culture, not to understand the physical world. I expect relativity, not reliability, in these appearances, but in that relativity I hope to find some insight. To get at that insight, I try to minimize self-conscious style and interpretation by using a neutral point of view and pragmatic brush strokes. In the end, of course, there is no real neutrality nor is the painting impersonal. But in filtering the act of seeing through that conceptual framework, ordinary things are re-created and are given a significance beyond their visual function.

Whatever meaning is revealed arises out of the connection of the present with the past, and the connection of a person with the visual world.

KEITH B. HARDER

M.V.A. PAINTING THESIS, 1989

Slide Identification

1. "Art Workshop 3"
1988
74 x 54 cm
oil on canvas
2. "Art Workshop Window"
1988
122 x 82 cm
oil on canvas
3. "Studio Shelf"
1988
58 x 49 cm
oil on canvas
4. "Gloves"
1988
31 x 31 cm
oil on canvas
5. "Pocket"
1988
31 x 31 cm
oil on canvas
6. "Large Gloves"
1988
61 x 61 cm
oil on canvas
7. "Apples"
1989
31 x 31 cm
oil on canvas
8. "Observing December"
1989
226 x 137 cm
oil on canvas

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